

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 387

TM 021 253

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TITLE The Context Oriented Training Method.
PUB DATE 1994-00-00
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994). Produced by Scienter, research center and service provider organization, Bologna, Italy.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Abstract Reasoning; Administration; Business; *Competence; Context Effect; *Education Work Relationship; Employment Qualifications; *Instructional Effectiveness; Labor Force Development; *Learning Processes; Skill Development; Supervisors; *Training

ABSTRACT

The Context Oriented Training (COT) method is introduced and explored in this paper. COT is a means of improving the training process, beginning with the observation and analysis of current corporate experiences in the field. The learning context lies between the development of professional competencies in training and the operational side in the workplace. Both formal and informal learning processes are involved. COT training mainly addresses formal learning processes but must also acknowledge the informal processes. In COT, the trainee's path is not linear, but is accomplished through constant shifts from training to working. Other polarities that must be acknowledged in COT include those of warmth and chill (interaction as opposed to isolation) and passiveness and activeness. To avoid learning gaps, the training path must balance these polarities. The example of the COT of a supervisor in a chemical industry illustrates the learning path in COT. Better learner involvement and better use of human resources are the main results of the context-oriented approach. Ten figures illustrate the approach. (SLD)



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THE CONTEXT ORIENTED TRAINING METHOD

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Bologna, 1994

THE CONTEXT ORIENTED TRAINING

INTRODUCTION

Training should progressively acquire a more and more relevant role in enterprises, according to EC forecastings estimating that a person now entering the labour market will have to be requalified three times on the average during his/her professional life.

In reality, only in specific cases training plays a central role in enterprises. Starting from organisational considerations, one can deduce that the ultimate objective of any training action within an enterprise is accompanying the change or the improvement of the company performance.

Context oriented training relies to this context, not in the sense of a complete set of prescriptions covering the whole training process, from needs analysis to assessment, but rather of a mean for improving the training process, starting from the observation and the analysis of current corporate experiences in the field.

The starting point is therefore represented by an identification and diagnostic system of training processes, or better, of learning processes taking place in a corporate environment.

DEFINITION OF THE LEARNING CONTEXT

The learning context lies between two opposite sides in our representation: on one side is training (devoted to the development of professional competencies); on the other is the operational side, i.e. the workplace, devoted to professional practices.

Outside this, there is the development of competencies (skills) not coherent with the operational context on the training side, and the development of professional activities, not promoting any meaningful learning process, on the operational side.

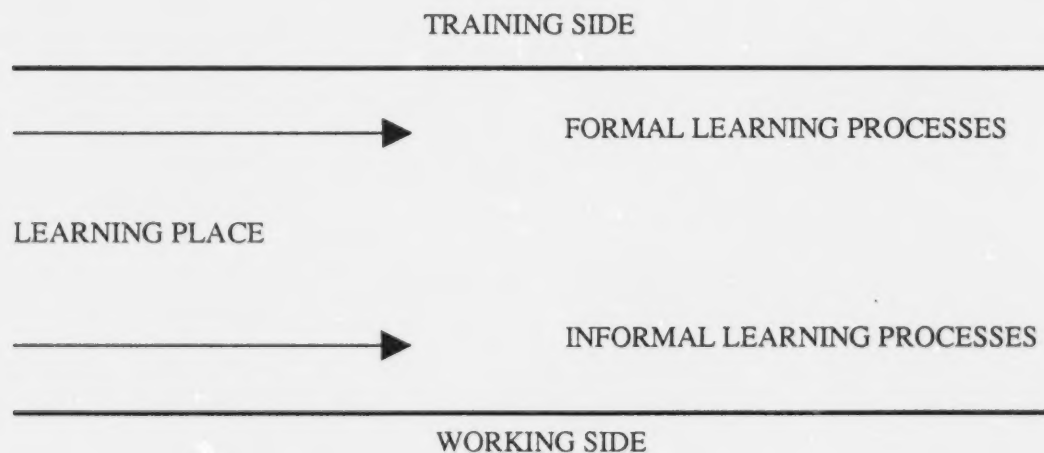
Two different types of learning processes can be identified: the formal and informal learning processes.

We mean by **formal learning processes** all those related to “institutionalised” events linked to learning: school lessons, university lectures, inclass-room training, study of training materials, Computer Based Training and so on ... In all these situations, who learns is acknowledged the role of “learner” and is provided with one or more “interfaces”, which operate especially as “mediators” of messages having a training goal.

On the contrary, **informal learning processes**, are often directly self-managed by learners (if we still agree on that term). An example is the learning process leading computer salesmen to a deeper and deeper knowledge of their clients, through continuous interaction.

Informal processes are not “official” and more difficult to be recognised within an organisation; however, they are determinant for the maintenance and the development of a good performance.

Context oriented training mainly addresses formal learning processes, but the acknowledgement of the existence of other processes for the development of professional competences can lead to rather important implications on the methodological side.



CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ABSTRACTION IN LEARNING

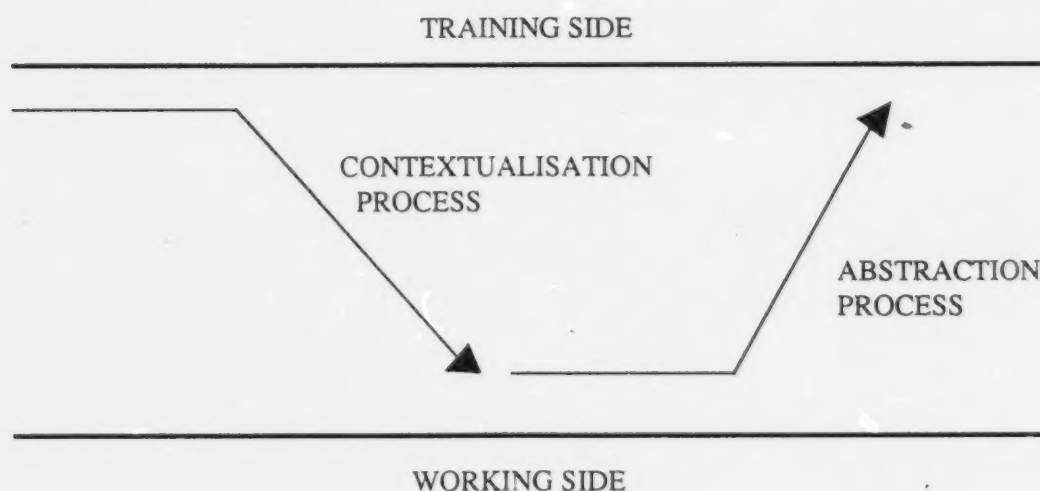
The simple acknowledgement of formal and informal learning does not say much about their effectiveness. At this purpose, one can observe that a pre-condition to the success of formal learning processes is the **contextualization** into the learner's operational practice of what was learnt.

It is therefore necessary that training contents are "transported" to the operational side and here used.

At the same time, a necessary condition to the success of informal learning processes is the "**abstraction**" of current operational practices to an autonomous professional competence, separable from the context in which it originated.

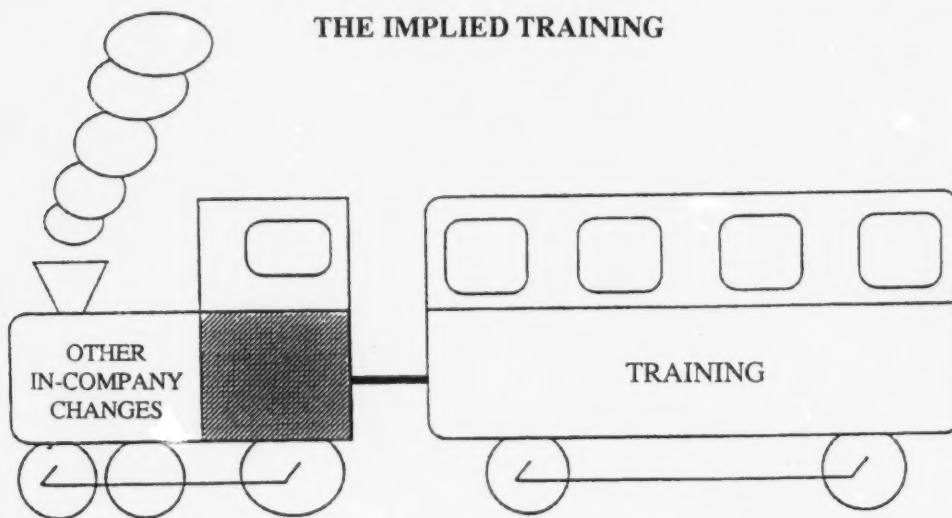
In the above-mentioned case of computer salesmen their experience in the relationship with their clients might, or might not, lead them to recognise correctly and rapidly the type of clients in another commercial sector.

In this case, the operational experience is "transported" to the opposite side, and synthesised into a recognisable competence.



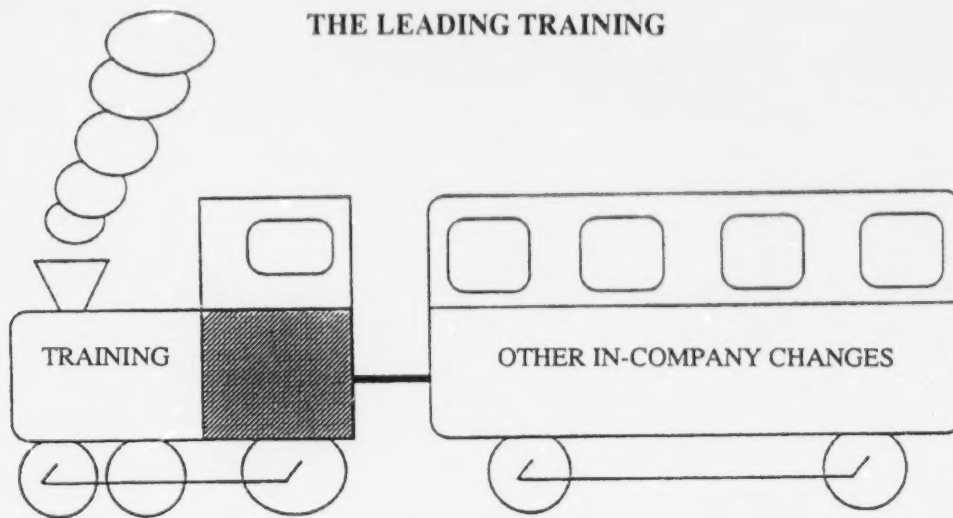
IMPLIED TRAINING AND LEADING TRAINING

Let's concentrate now on formal learning processes. As we argued above, corporate training aims at accompanying and ensuring changes/improvements to the company performance. It should be acknowledged, however, that these changes/improvements can assign two distinct roles to training.



In the case of “**implied training**”, the projects of the change/improvement of company performance are based on transformations which are not principally concerning human resources, if not as a secondary outcome.

A change in the product/service, in the process (procedures, etc....), tools (technologies, etc....) obviously implies a personnel training activity, to update their skills to the changes of environmental conditions, both at the internal and external level.



In the case of **"leading" training**, the projects of change/improvement of company performance are essentially focussed on the autonomous development of human resources competences, in so far as the change/improvement aimed at is exclusively depending on the personnel performance.

The improvement in the relationship between clients and the front office, the decreasing errors or delays due to personnel, the overcoming of operational stress situations in small peripheral units constitute examples of change/improvement projects almost exclusively based on human resources development.

The independent variable is therefore represented in this case by the human factor, the change of which produces a potential effect on other environmental factors, as a consequence of the learning process.

It is obvious that the **"leading"** and **"implied"** training are at the opposite of a continuum and that one can find intermediate cases in real company situations: it is quite useful for training designer to position each training action on this axe.

Leading training

Implied training

Change implementation

Knowledge transfer

THE LEARNING GAP

Let's get back to the contextualization process formerly introduced. This process is strongly influenced by the position of the training action on the "leading"/"implied" training axe.

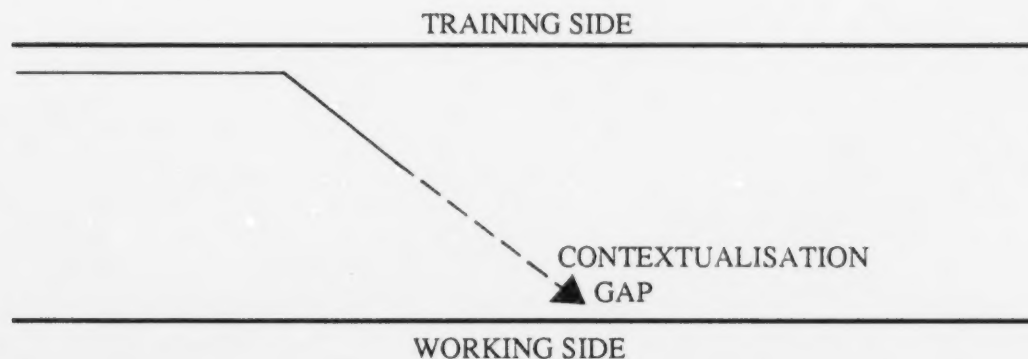
In the case of "implied" training, in fact, contextualization is intrinsic to the training action, the expected performance being already established and connected to a specific predetermined change of scenario. In other words, if competences are to be updated to any environmental change, the contextualization is not a problematic phase, even if there might always be a problem of timing between the acquisition of new competences and the change in the environmental conditions.

A training programme implied by a shift into existing working procedures, due to a change in the legal framework, represents an example in which the expected performance is already defined by the characteristics of the new procedures.

In this case, all the attention will focus on the search of pedagogical effectiveness, and the training function will attain its goal when the trainee will have acquired the transmitted contents.

On the contrary, in the case of "leading" training and, more generally, whenever it is not possible to fix *ex ante* a clear objective of the training activity in terms of expected performance, contextualization is the real critical factor, probably determinant in several training actions that produced a rather modest result if compared to the resources employed. The operational context, in fact, is not already prepared to receive the change promoted by training and, on the contrary, often inertial trends inhibiting the "leading" action of training take place.

When the contextualization process is not completed, a "**Learning Gap**" occurs, that is, literally, the difference between what is transmitted and what is learnt, but that can be considered in a working situation as the difference between what is transmitted and what is applied.



THE LEARNING PATH AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Let's refer to the configuration formerly proposed, related to the training, working and learning sides.

In Context Oriented Training, the trainee's ideal path is never linear, but it is accomplished through constant shifts from one side to another, alternating situations and activities significantly different among themselves, fostering contextualization and the consequent feed back.

Several corporate training operators report that quite a large number of training actions present important learning gaps, since the two envisaged practices, in-classroom lectures and experimental applications on behalf of the trainee have been employed without any real alternance: the first theoretical phase overloads trainees with contents, while the second substantially abandons them with only generic and complex indications.

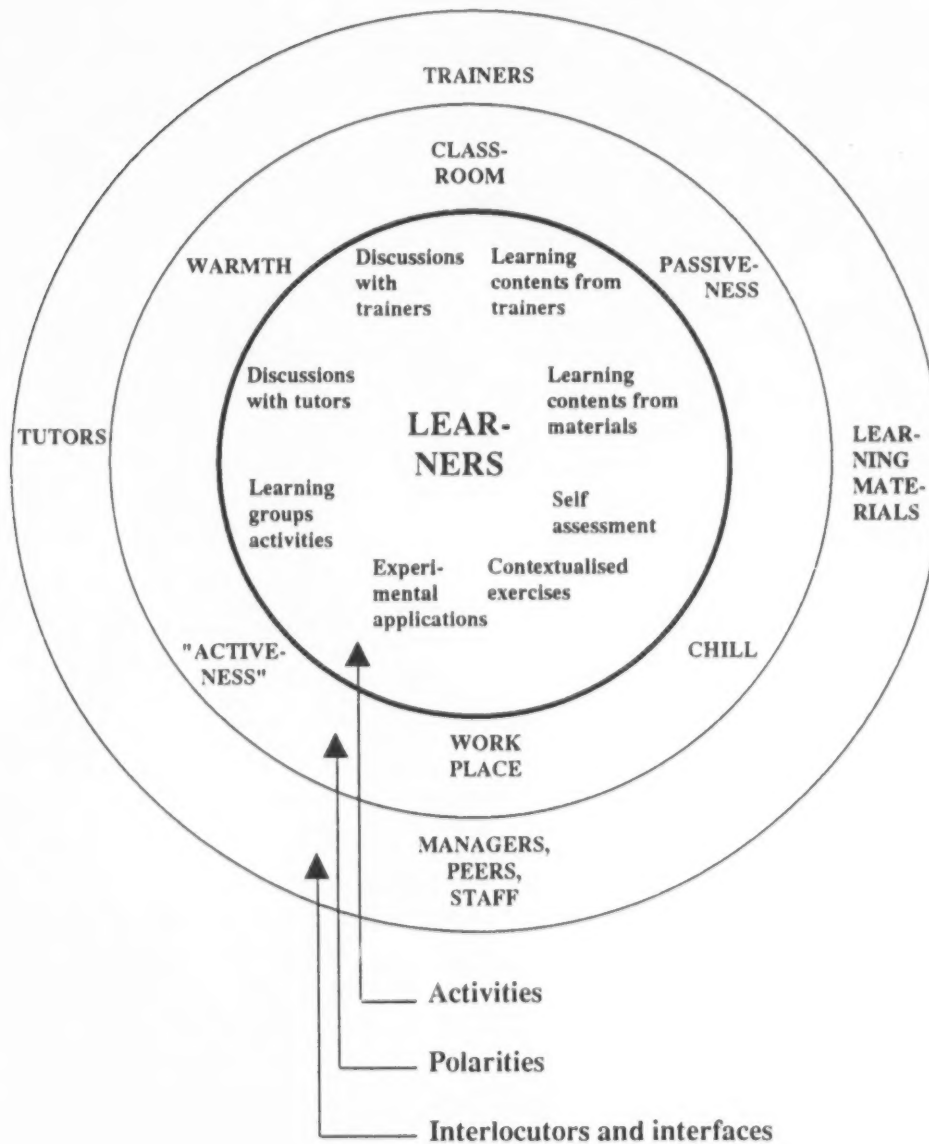
*Context Oriented Training tends to foster the circle
Idea - Example - Exercise - Activity.*

Until now, we situated the learning place between the training side and the working side. This is not, however, the only polarity axe to act on the learning process. There are in fact two additional polarities: "warmth" - "chill" and "activeness" - "passiveness".

"**Warmth**" is connected to the free interaction with experts, not directly involved in the usual working environment, through: discussion, simulations, role-plays; "**chill**" refers to learning situation characterised by the trainee's isolation: a typical example is the use of self-learning materials.

"**Passiveness**" (a polarity next to "chill" but having a different meaning) is linked to the reception of the training message, be it in classroom or through self-learning materials; on the opposite side "**activeness**" relates to the experimental knowledge of the message by the trainee: exercises, group works and applications of what is learnt.

THE LEARNING PLACE (SECTION)



In Context Oriented Training the trainee's learning path must be designed with a balanced mix of activities corresponding to the various present polarities.

The contiguity among different trainees' activities doesn't necessarily mean the continuity among themselves.

A further possibility of originating the Learning Gap might therefore be given by the fact that in the contextualization path, too much attention has been placed on the right or the left hemisphere of the represented circle.

"Passiveness" and "activeness", "chill" and "warmth", that are, respectively, listening and elaboration, analysis and confrontation, must adequately be represented in the training path.

- Some training actions have not reached the expected results because they followed too a warm strategy: simulations, debates, confrontations, group works have developed quite a high degree of appreciation of the training activity, but once back to the working place, the individual has frequently felt disappointed. The development of communication skills, attained through in class-room courses entailing, in one single flow, simulations and role plays, might easily meet difficulties in the contextualization process, because the final application context had been neglected.

Other training activities had to face the opposite problem: courses exclusively based on self-learning may produce the Learning Gap, if the trainee's motivation is not maintained and supported through free occasions for confrontation.

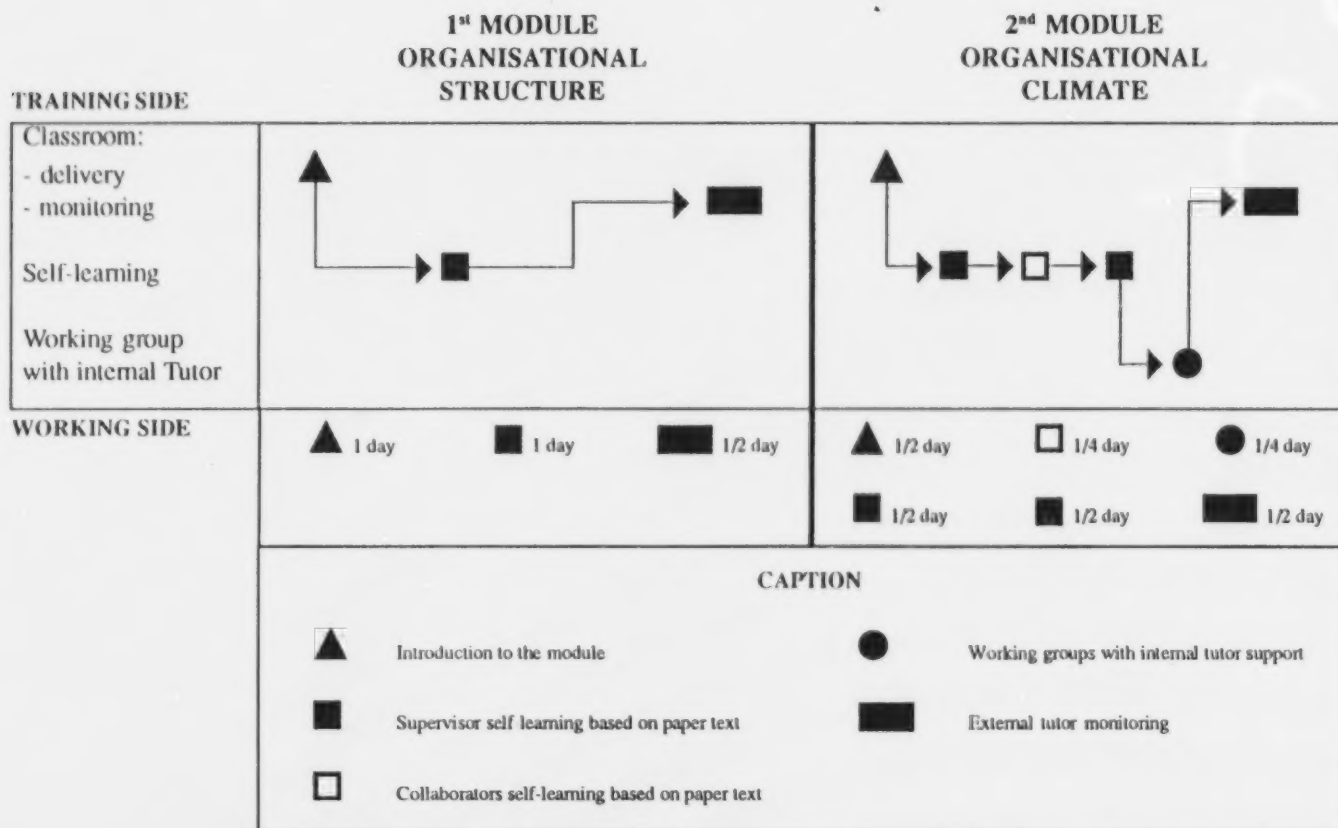
An advanced multimedia station for language learning, placed in a head-office premises, has been basically forgotten, after a first interest: the learning path was too unbalanced on one single polarity.

It must be, however, underlined that the design of a balanced mix of activities does not necessarily imply the segmentation of a learning path into equal parts, correspondent to the different polarities: the training strategy should always be defined on the basis of the participants' characteristics and the objectives to attain.

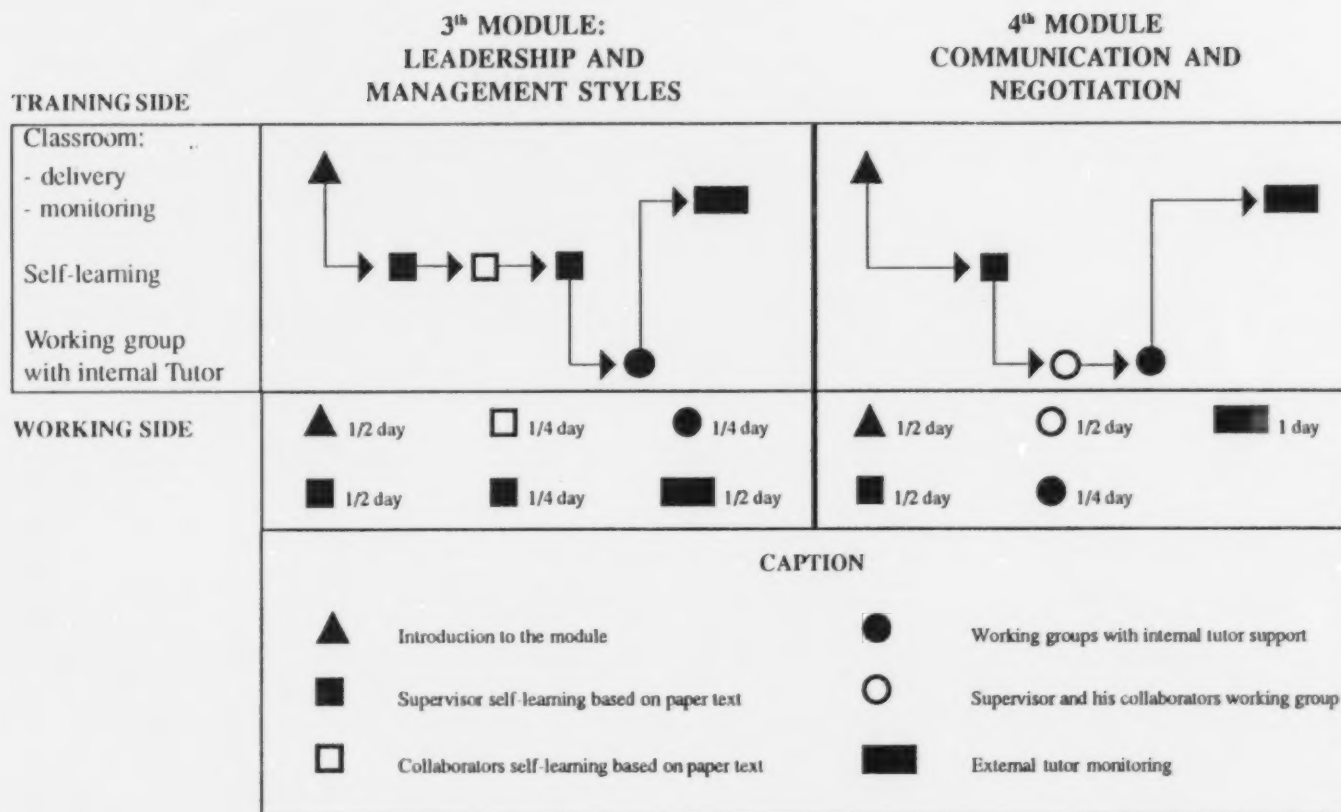
The learning path may therefore focus on certain polarities on the basis of some specific and explicit reasons.

An example of learning path, following the Context Oriented Training method, may be represented by the training action designed for the professional profile of a supervisor in a chemical industry. Such a path is reproduced in the diagrams in the following pages.

LEARNING PATH

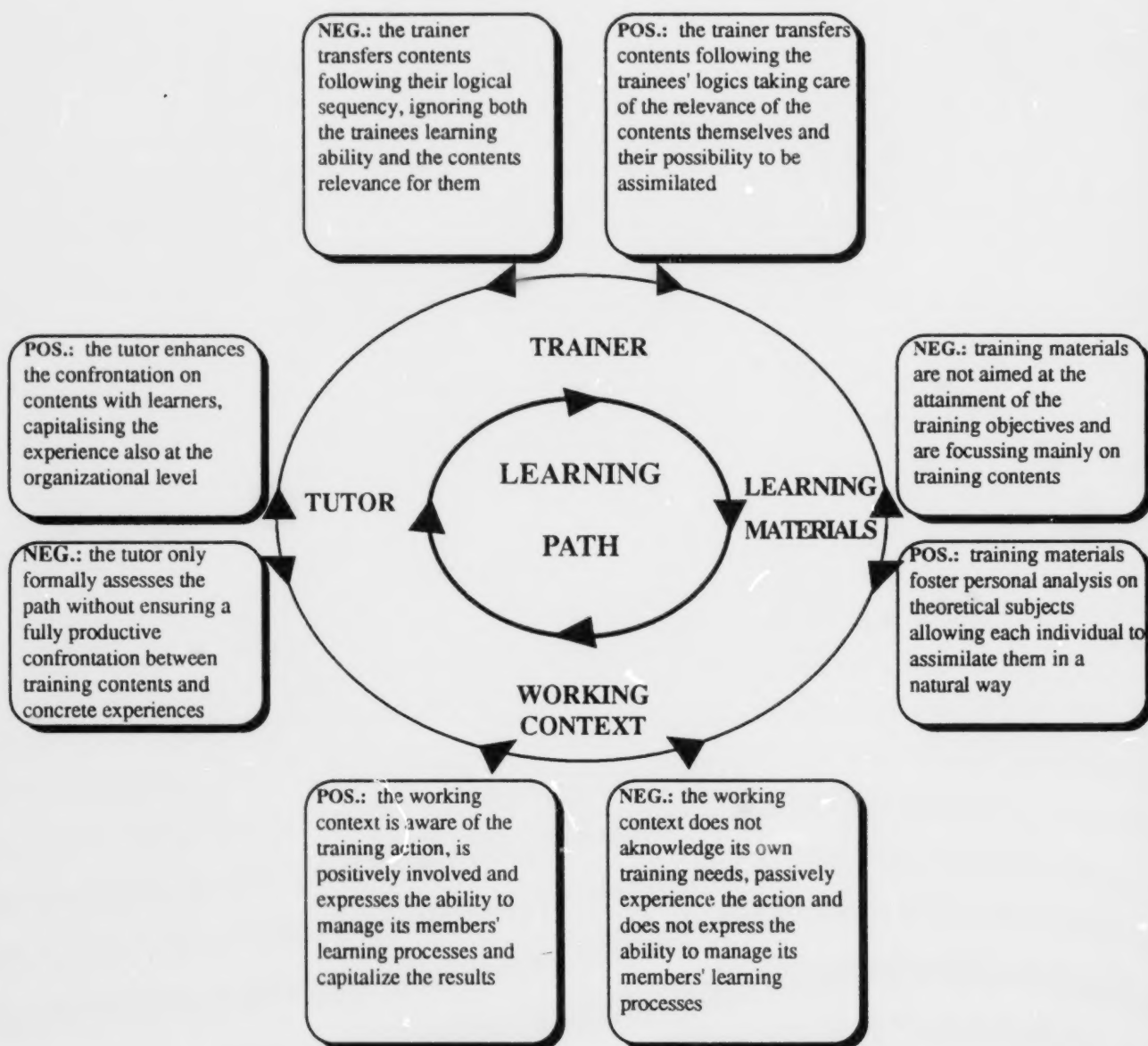


LEARNING PATH



POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF INTERFACES ON THE LEARNING PATH

Keeping in mind that the learner owns the titularity of the learning path, the interfaces involved in it may play a positive or negative role, fostering or undermining the development of the learning process.



INVOLVEMENT OF THE OPERATIONAL CONTEXT (WORKING PLACE)

The involvement of the operational context in the training activity is, evidently, essential in a method which sets contextualization as a major relevance and innovation factor.

Such an involvement, in reality, can happen in several ways, on the basis of the context itself.

More generally, it is necessary to recognise that, in front of the more and more complex production processes, occurring in every sector, the corporate organisational evolution is leading more and more to the management of their own production processes through the management of human resources devoted to it.

This implies that company managers, at any hierarchical level they might be, will be the more able to manage the processes typical of their own unit, the more they will be able to manage their own human resources; that is their competences, ensuring their continuous development.

The involvement should therefore relate, in first instance, to the line managers of the trainee, who can be considered as a sort of "sub-client" of the activity.

Such an involvement should be activated before, during and after the initiative. Before the initiative, the line manager can participate to training design, giving useful information on trainees (needs analysis and pre-requisites), to the definition of objectives and learning plans.

In a Context Oriented Training initiative, the participation of the line manager to the training design has the objective not only of bringing it improvements and integrations, but also of training, in an indirect way, the manager himself to the role entailed in the implementation of the activity.

During the activity, the manager's task consists of fostering the last phase of the contextualization process, having in mind the organisational objectives (both those referred to company strategies or to the organisational development of the manager's unit) set in a possible learning contract.

THE CONTEXT-ORIENTED TRAINING

In reality, in the example of Context Oriented Training action, previously illustrated, it has been demonstrated useful to involve also the learners' collaborators. This obviously depends on the characteristics of the relationships among the workplace different subjects and the objectives of the training action.

In this way, the orientation of this methodology is furtherly defined: not only to direct the training activity to a category of specific professional profiles, but also to the overall workplace context, so to promote a balanced changing process shared by all the different components.

In the training activity exemplified in pages 10-11, the context-oriented approach is represented by the synthetic re-proposition of contextualization subjects and activities contained in module 1 to the trainees' collaborators, by the comparison of activities of both and by free interactions between supervisors and collaborators on the proposed course themes.

The training potential of these situations is rather high, in so far as these allow participants to really "work" on course contents and better understand and share the objectives.

By doing so, the training action is not only circumscribed to participants, but involves, even if not completely, their reference context.

The methodology introduced here can be defined, by that way, as "**Context Oriented Training**".

Main advantages

In the previous pages you have seen an example of a learning process according to the C.O.T. method. In effect the method has been completely checked out in a wide training initiative within the Italian side of one of the largest chemical enterprise world-wide. Starting from a traditional approach (training of supervisors concerning the development of management skills particularly related to the improvement of the relationship between the supervisors and their staff; repetition of the intervention in four different sites), the application of the methodology has contributed to increase the awareness of Human Resources responsables and the visibility of the need to create a shared approach to management issues and styles.

By that way, the method represents a first concrete step from training to organisational learning. More specifically, the main registered advantages are:

- a) better active involvement of the learners, after a brief initial period devoted to create the appropriate confidence with the method;

- b) more natural contextualisation of the introduced concepts, through the activities featured in the learning materials and the partially structured activities on the workplace;
- c) better involvement and satisfaction of the local responsables of H.R. development, due to the active role of an internal tutor which has the task to adapt the course to the local organisational key issues (creation and lead of working groups, involvement of the participants' staff, etc...)
- d) cost-effectiveness of the initiative, due to the use of learning material (quite unusual in European continental management training): the external consultant is involved not more than 50 % of the global learning time;
- e) the continuous improvement of the course standard; due to the introduction of "hard" components in a typically "soft" process.